DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 796 HE 033 926

AUTHOR Maher, Michelle A.
TITLE Professional Living Situations: Cohorts as Communities of Living and Learning.
PUB DATE 2001-04-00
NOTE 41p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Seattle, WA, April 10-14, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Graduate Students; Graduate Study; *Group Membership; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Relationship; *Learning; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

Within cohorts, stable student membership and interdependent learning tasks create a community-like environment. While this situation can provide a protective environment for learning, it can create stressful situations as students learn to live and learn together. Using a conceptual framework built from adult learning literature and group literature, this study explores students' understanding of cohort membership and learning in a cohort. Interview and observational data were collected over a 10-month period from 13 graduate students enrolled in a Master's Degree of Education cohort program. Data were qualitatively analyzed resulting in the identification of key pattern codes. Development of student roles and norms, resolution of student-faculty conflict, development of cohort agency, and specific ways in which cohort member ship facilitated and constrained learning emerged as major themes. Results suggest that students learned beyond the curriculum; they learned how to live together in a cohort community. (Contains 3 figures and 26 references.) (Author/SLD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 451 796

Running head: PROFESSIONAL LIVING SITUATIONS: COHORT COMMUNITIES

Professional Living Situations: Cohorts as Communities of Living and Learning

Michelle A. Maher

University of South Carolina

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. Maher

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Presented at the American Educational Research Association

Annual Meeting

April 10 – 14, 2001

HE033946

THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK

Abstract

Within cohorts, stable student membership and interdependent learning tasks create a community-like environment. While this situation can provide a protective environment for learning, it can create stressful situations as students learn to live and learn together. Using a conceptual framework built from adult learning literature and group literature, this study explores students' understanding of cohort membership and learning in a cohort. Interview and observational data were collected over a ten-month period from thirteen graduate students enrolled in a Master's Degree of Education cohort program. Data were qualitatively analyzed resulting in the identification of key pattern codes. Development of student roles and norms, resolution of student-faculty conflict, development of cohort agency, and specific ways in which cohort membership facilitated and constrained learning emerged as major themes. Results suggest that students learned beyond the curriculum; they learned how to live together in a cohort community.

Professional Living Situations: Cohorts as Communities of Living and Learning

Adult education, particularly at the graduate level, can offer the opportunity for both rewarding and disheartening developmental experiences. Often, students encounter situations in which they feel overwhelmed or overburdened. Some choose to 'go it alone' and enjoy the autonomy of moving through coursework, preparation for examinations, and other academic requirements on their own time and schedule. Other students, however, find little comfort in this autonomy, instead preferring to form groups with their student colleagues for study or for emotional support.

On a broader level, many programs of professional development have begun to establish formalized groups, or student cohorts, among their student population. This increased use of cohort arrangements parallels the movement in business organizations toward a greater use of groups and teams in all facets of organizational life (Marshall, 1995). A student cohort has been defined as a group of between 10 and 25 students who begin a program of study together, proceed through a series of developmental experiences together in the context of that program of study, and end the program at approximately the same time (Barnett & Muse, 1993; Barnett & Caffarella, 1992).

Cohorts are unique arrangements that can vary across a number of structural features, such as whether the cohort is "open" (i.e., the cohort program offers rolling admissions and allows more student choice in the sequencing of courses and the time to complete the degree) or "closed" (i.e., students enter the cohort together and remain together for all of their coursework in lock-step sequence), specific sequencing of coursework (e.g., many cohort programs have students participate in an intensive learning experience at the beginning of the program) and

types of learning experiences (e.g., some cohorts require students to participate in a series of off-campus experiential activities designed to build trust among students).

Two streams of literature are typically referenced to understand students' experiences in educational cohorts. First, because the students of interest are adults, the adult learning literature provides insight into the unique characteristics and expectations that these students bring to the cohort experience. Second, because cohorts are, by their nature, groups, literature exploring the life cycle of groups and key group phenomena provides insight into the possible developmental trajectory and key processes associated with cohorts.

Adult Learning Literature

Central to the adult learning literature is Knowles' andragogical model, which has, as Merriam and Brockett note, "...formed the basis for structuring learning activities with adults. This concept...underpins much of the writing about adult education" (1997, p. 15). This model is derived from the term "Andragogy" used by Knowles since the late 1960s, which he defines as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, 1984, p. 6). Key concepts of the andragogical model include assumptions that the learner is self-directing and has an active need to participate in the learning process, that the learner has much previous experience, some or all of which is of value as an educational resource, and that the learner has a need for affiliation within the learning environment. As Knowles suggests, the acceptance of these assumptions would have far-reaching implications for the design of educational programs.

Key structural features of cohort arrangements and learning activities undertaken by students in cohorts appear to align with the assumptions of the andragogical model. Regarding adults' "deep need to be self-directing" and actively involved in the educational process (Knowles, 1990, p. 31), Barnett and Muse (1993) note that the organizational structures of many

cohorts permit students to engage in meaningful decision-making and other self-directing activities that influence the program's scope and direction. As other researchers have noted (e.g., Darkenwalk, 1987; Ennis, 1989), this may contribute to adult learners' sense of ownership and commitment to an educational program. Regarding adults' need for the acknowledgement and use of their previous experience, Barnett and Caffarella note that "activities included in cohort development such as life maps, reflective journals, and critical incidents introduce students' past and current experiences into the curriculum of the program" (1992, p. 12).

A further need of all students, but perhaps more specifically of adult students, is the need for affiliation in the educational context. Cohort arrangements offer the possibility of formatting the curriculum such that it provides a sense of interconnectedness among students. These arrangements often encourage intense initial experiential activities, followed by a series of courses taken by students in lock-step unison. The "closed" nature of many cohort arrangements, combined with the interdependent nature of many student activities, ensures that students will have opportunities to develop meaningful interpersonal networks to an extent beyond what might be possible in the traditional classroom settings comprised of "stranger groups" of students.

Literature on Groups

By their nature, cohort arrangements are groups of students; it is therefore appropriate to briefly review relevant literature on groups. Two areas of this broad literature domain appear particularly relevant to this effort: the literature on group development and the literature on group dynamics, a term coined by Lewin (1951) to designate "the powerful processes that influence individuals when in group situations and the study of these processes" (Forsyth, 1990, p. 12).

In general, most groups manifest a recognizable pattern of growth and change throughout their life cycle. Forsyth (1990) notes that groups move through discernable stages, beginning with an orientation stage and then moving though maintenance stages, finally arriving at a dissolution stage. Tuckman's (1965) labels for these stages of group development have become commonly cited in the group and team literature (Forsyth, 1990). Tuckman's labels for these stages are *forming* (orientation), *storming* (conflict), *norming* (cohesion), *performing* (performance), and *adjourning* (dissolution).

As related to the literature on cohorts, the forming stage is associated with the intense orientation activities in which many students are required to participate upon joining the cohort. In this stage, students are introduced to the program, instructors, and fellow students. Everything is new and students must orient themselves to their surroundings.

Little of the literature on cohorts appears to be relevant to the storming stage, although there is some research (e.g., Maher, 2000) to suggest that some cohort students report experiencing conflict with each other as part of an unstructured class experience. In general, however, this stage refers to group situations in which group leadership is undefined, either because a leader has yet to emerge or because two or more group members vie to be the group leader. In cohort arrangements, instructors initially provide group leadership. However, there is some research to suggest (e.g., Maher, 2000) that in some cohort arrangements, students actively vie with each other for informal leadership positions, while in other cohort arrangements, students develop a type of "shared leadership."

In the norming stage, Forsyth (1990) suggests that cohesion and the development of group norms that regulate and stabilize the group's internal processes generally replace conflict. Of all group processes, the literature most closely associates cohort arrangements with

occurrence of group cohesiveness (e.g., Barnett & Caffarella, 1992). Cohesiveness is the sense of shared unity and solidarity that binds a group together (Ridgeway, 1983), resulting from the "total field of forces" that influence member retention (Festinger, 1950, p. 274). It is probable that the structural features of cohorts, particularly the unique characteristics of "closed" cohorts and the prevalence of interdependent tasks, facilitate the development of group cohesiveness. Further, Reynolds (1993) observes that cohesiveness in cohorts can be related to tasks (such as shared efforts to accomplish assignments) or social interactions (such as informal contact outside of the classroom).

While cohesiveness is still relevant at the performing stage, other group dynamics become manifest. Some researchers have observed that collusion sometimes occurs in cohort arrangements. For example, in their investigation of a cohort of educational leadership doctoral students, Wesson, Holman, Holman, & Cox (1996) found evidence that some students passively colluded by not fully participating in group projects or by not holding accountable those students who were not doing their "fair share" of the work. The general groups and team literature identifies this type of collusion as "social loafing" (Williams, Harkins, & Latane, 1981), a term that refers to the reduction of effort by individuals when working in groups.

Another relevant group dynamic that may become apparent in the performing stage is "groupthink," defined by Janis as "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures" (1972, p. 9). According to Janis, in some cases groupthink is related to a high degree of group cohesiveness, which limits the amount of dissent in the group to the point that internal disagreements disappear—resulting in poor decision-making. Although there is little in the literature on cohorts that makes mention of groupthink, Maher (2000) did identify this group dynamic in a cohort. One participant in this study

specifically noted the tendency for cohort members to think in certain pre-determined ways by saying, "We tend to converge a bit on groupthink in some occasions.... Where if it wasn't a cohort, then you would have to have all these different people mixed up all the time with different ideas going on" (Maher, 2000, p. 15).

The published literature on cohorts has also paid little attention to the last group development stage, the adjourning stage. One exception to this is the observation of some researchers that cohort members tend to remain in contact with each other even after program completion (Barnett & Muse, 1993).

Both the adult learning literature and literature on group development and group dynamics can provide insight into students' likely experiences in educational cohorts. As detailed above, adults bring unique characteristics and expectations to the cohort environment, which, within cohorts, can be structured to address these unique aspects and incorporate them into the learning process. In addition, as cohorts are groups, understanding common group developmental trajectories and group dynamics can lead to further insight into students' experiences as they participate in the cohort.

Communities as Cohorts

Combining key aspects from the adult learning literature and literature on group dynamics and phenomenon may lead to a new conceptualization of cohorts – a conceptualization of cohorts as communities in which student members live and learn together. In this approach, many cohorts share several features with other types of communities. For example, at a fundamental level cohort communities, like other communities, depend upon consistent membership over an extended period of time.

As relevant to key aspects from the adult learning literature, in cohort communities, as in other communities, member input is important. Student members of a cohort community may be either obligated or allowed to assume a greater responsibility in directing their own learning experiences, perhaps leading to an increased sense of ownership and commitment to the cohort community. As in other communities, in the cohort community member experience is important. Because student members of cohort communities often work together over an extended period of time, each student's unique prior experience, together with attitudes and values resulting from that experience, are more likely to become manifest in and influence the educational environment. Finally, many communities foster a strong sense of affiliation among their members. In the cohort communities, student members often report the development of family-like bonds between themselves and other students. Of all student arrangements in higher education, cohorts, because of their requirement that students "live together" over an extended period that typically facilitates the development of strong student ties, may be uniquely able to address students' need for affiliation in the educational environment.

As relevant to key aspects from the group development and dynamics literature, like many communities, cohort communities can experience the frustration and excitement that accompany a pattern of growth and change throughout their life cycle. Phenomenon that develop in many communities – indeed, that develop in many groups – are likely to be part of students' cohort experience. Many communities identify leadership personnel and norms. Cohort members may also formally or informally identify leaders and leadership norms. Just as cohesiveness, collusion and groupthink may characterize the relationships among community members, so may they also characterize relationships among cohort members. Finally, just as members of a community who relocate may or may not remain in contact with the members of

the community who remain behind, cohort members may or may not remain in contact with each other when the formal educational program ends.

Purpose of Study

Although a number of descriptive studies have been undertaken in the past few years to explore the effect of cohort participation on students (e.g., Sprague & Norton, 1999; Wesson, et al., 1996), many of these studies rely on surveys to ask students "after the fact" about their cohort experiences. Unfortunately, there are few studies that offer an in-depth exploration of students' experiences in a cohort. As noted by Wesson et al. (1996), relatively little research has explored the impact of the cohort experience on students themselves. Further, there are few if any studies that explore the conceptualization of the cohort as a community.

The primary purpose of the present study was to address this deficit in our understanding of adult students' experiences in an educational cohort by exploring students' first-hand experiences with cohort membership. A secondary purpose was to explore the relevance of the concept of community to the cohort format. Three broad question areas guided this effort:

1. What does cohort membership mean to students?
2. What does learning in a cohort mean to students?
3. Do cohorts bear resemblance to other communities, and if so, how?

Methodology

Setting of the Study

The research setting for this study was a Masters Degree in Education program offered at a southeastern university. The program was divided into a 12-credit hour education core and an 18-credit hour specialization section. The focus for this effort was on exploring students' experiences as they completed the first 10 hours of the 12-hour education core. This core was

designed as a "closed" cohort; students were admitted at only one point in time and they proceeded through core coursework on a lock-step schedule. Of special note was the fact that this study was conducted during the first operational year of the program; students were therefore enrolling in an academic program being offered for the first time.

Students earned the 10 core credit hours by completing four different courses. These courses were structured to overlap each other so that content in the core could be integrated. The sequencing of coursework did not follow the traditional college semester or quarter timing. Instead, courses were offered on an alternative schedule designed to accommodate teachers' work schedules. For example, some courses were held on weekends.

Study Participants

The study participants were 13 graduate students enrolled in the cohort program; all but one student were female. Every graduate student had at least three years of experience as a classroom instructor. Subjects taught by these students varied (e.g., math, music, special education, English as a second language) as did the amount of teaching experience, ranging from teachers with three years of experience to veteran teachers.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection extended over a ten-month period. Core cohort classes began in July of 1999 but were not held in August or September so that the student participants, who were pre-school and elementary school teachers, could concentrate on activities associated with the opening of the school year. Cohort classes resumed in October and, except for a period during the winter holidays, met continuously throughout the fall and into the following spring. Data collection for this project ended in April of 2000.

This study used a short-term longitudinal design. During the study, students were asked to participate in semi-structured interviews and to allow observation of their participation in cohort activities. Each student in the cohort was interviewed in a semi-structured format three times. The first interviews took place shortly after participants began their first class in the program (July, 1999), the second interviews took place five months after participants had begun the program (November, 1999), and the final interviews took place ten months after participants had begun the program (April, 2000). Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. Transcribed interviews were then coded using NVivo, a qualitative software package.

Descriptive codes were generated from the responses to each interview question. These codes provided an overview of the students' thoughts and feelings about the cohort as well as how they anticipated they would learn in the cohort. Codes included researcher-generated categories (e.g., cohort benefits) and participant-generated categories (i.e., codes created based on participants' unique insights in the context). Pattern codes were generated from the combination of both researcher-generated and participant-generated descriptive codes. As Miles and Huberman (1994) note, pattern codes illustrate an emergent leitmotiv that becomes discernable after gaining familiarity with local events and relationships. Pattern codes were then used to create a visual format, or a model, to discern interconnections between the codes. For example, the code "pioneer cohort" was developed after it became apparent that this was an emergent leitmotiv that described both how participants defined themselves and incidents associated with initial program offerings.

Cohort activities were observed in six full-day summer classes, six full-day or evening fall classes, and fourteen full-day or evening spring classes. Notes from these observations were

transcribed and coded. Observational notes provided additional support for the development of descriptive and pattern codes.

Results

Significant findings from each major data collection period, summer of 1999, fall of 1999, and spring of 2000, are next presented.

Summer: Understandings and Expectations of Membership and Learning

At the start of the cohort format, students were individually asked a series of questions about the meaning of cohort membership. Specifically, students were asked about their reactions to being in a cohort and benefits and drawbacks they associated with cohorts. Their responses were combined with observation notes capturing their experiences as they occurred over an intensive three-week course schedule.

Interview responses revealed that four students had prior experience with cohorts, while the remaining students had very limited knowledge about a cohort format. Most had applied to the program without considering the requirements of this cohort format (e.g., lock-step progression through classes, remaining with the same classmates over an extended period of time). As one student commented,

> "Actually, I had no idea what a cohort was and I really still don't know exactly except that it seems like I'm going to be with these people for a while, that we'll be studying together and moving through this program together. That wasn't really a concern of mine, or something that I really worried about or thought too much about."

Interview responses also indicated that a majority of students associated support, familiarity with other students, being exposed to different perspectives, and peer feedback as benefits of cohort membership. Domineering students, failure to live up to group expectations,

and concerns that other students would not be committed to the process were some of the drawbacks associated with cohort membership.

As students participated in the intensive three-week course schedule, emergent pattern codes indicated that some students identified themselves as "pioneers" while others identified themselves as "accidental tourists." Pioneers were excited about the opportunity of being the first students in a new academic program, while accidental tourists indicated that they had "fallen into" the program because they needed recertification credits. As one accidental tourist said,

> "I had to go back and do something; I might as well go for a degree instead of just going back and getting credits."

As the intensive three-week schedule proceeded, more students began to identify themselves as pioneers, in part because this theme was reinforced by cohort instructors, who used it to describe the cohorts' status and progress.

In regard to students' understanding of what it means to learning a cohort, because many students did not have an understanding of or previous experience with cohorts, students were asked to describe their experiences in and feelings toward working in small groups. These questions prompted many students to tell of both successful and unsuccessful group experiences. From their responses, it appeared that most students defined a group as successful when all group members benefited from the interaction. Most responses suggested that, in general, students valued shared collaboration and had benefited from it in the past. No response suggested that a student saw groups as a way to solely benefit at the expense of other group members.

As students participated in the intensive summer course schedule, emergent pattern codes indicated that learning in this cohort was centered on the cohort being a "pioneer cohort." In

their learning experiences, these students encountered new opportunities, but they also encountered new challenges. Some problems were associated with the unique scheduling of the cohort program, technology that failed to operate properly, and students' lack of access to technological equipment.

The compressed class schedule, in combination with procedural and technical problems, resulted in many students saying that they were becoming tired, frustrated, and overwhelmed. This student stress led to instructors' willingness to meet and offset students' frustrations by reducing course requirements or slowing down the delivery of course material. As one instructor commented,

> "I think that they [the students] weren't used to long days, and then having to work so intently, even though I told them about that, it's very different when you actually do it. I thought it was a little slow, and we couldn't get the technology to work and I dropped that, and I mean I sensed when they were getting frustrated and I backed down with what I had wanted to achieve in that four day period, but I'll pick it up again in October. I'll get there, but not as fast as I would have liked to."

Many of the class activities in the cohort involved small group participation. For example, the cohort was divided into "base groups" in which students were placed in groups with others who were as different as possible from themselves on a range of characteristics (teaching specialty, age, etc.). As the summer courses progressed, it became apparent that many of the small groups were experiencing conflict. Some groups were more successful at resolving conflict than others. For example, one student described a her experience working with another student in a group by saying,

> "If I ever get stuck with that person again, I wouldn't do it, I would definitely say 'no,' and I thought of that when (the instructor) was putting us into groups, and I thought if she puts me in a group with that person, there's no way, I just wouldn't, I wouldn't do it again."

However, throughout the first three weeks, there appeared to be a growing sense of familiarity among students, partly *because* they had the opportunity to work together in small groups. Toward the end of the third week, students were calling out to each other by name across the room, a marked difference from the first few days, when most classroom interaction was between a student and the instructor. An instructor noticed this developing cohesion and remarked,

> "I want you to know that someone came up to me and said, 'You mean after we get through the core program, you're going to turn us loose? Where's our next cohort? What are we going to do without our cohort?'"

However, the cohesion developed between cohort members in the first three weeks appeared to be somewhat tenuous. In the summer, students tended to say that they felt they were developing a cohesive group. When these students reflected on the summer session later in the year, they came to see this time as a period of relative discomfort. One student reflected on the summer session by saying,

> "It took a while to get comfortable. We met for three weeks in the summer, and I'm not a very open person at the very beginning and I tend to be kind of shy, so it did take a while to get where I felt comfortable with everybody..."

Emergent pattern codes from both interviews and observations formed a model representing students' cohort and learning experience during the intensive first three weeks of the cohort. This model is presented in Figure 1.

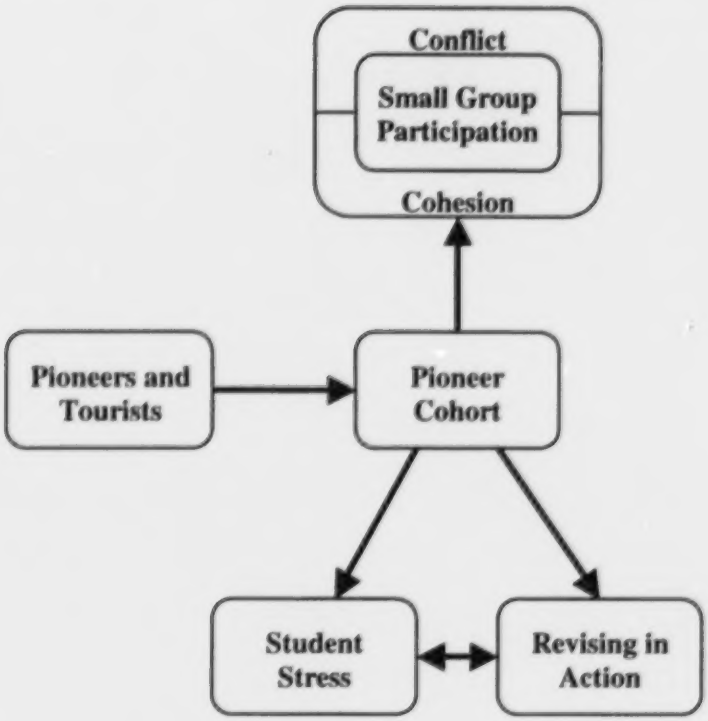

Figure 1. Model of Students' Summer Experiences

Fall: The Storms and Norms of Cohort Living

Cohort students and instructors returned to the classroom in early October, two months from the last time that they had met. In November, students responded to questions about the meaning of cohort membership and the meaning of learning in a cohort. In regard to the meaning of cohort membership, students were asked what it meant to them to be part of a cohort and how they would describe the nature of their interactions with other students in the cohort. Pattern codes emerged from responses to these questions and cohort activity observations. Pattern codes associated with the meaning of cohort membership at this time in the cohort included shared experiences, ebb and flow, family and team.

Regarding shared experiences, students realized that simply being together over time was beneficial because it meant that all cohort members shared the same experiences and in doing so came to know each other on a deeper level. By sharing the same experiences, cohort members developed a shared sense of history about the cohort and about each other. As one student commented,

> "I think it [being in a cohort] has to do more with "over time." Already we've been together longer than a class would be that meets for a semester because we started in the summer, and that accents the experience. You have everyone's story tucked away, like you have this deeper history of each person so you can put his or her thinking in context. You know the individuals more so everything is more in context."

Regarding ebb and flow, this pattern captured an aspect of the nature of student relationships at this time. Students commented that by this point in the cohort, everyone had "mellowed." Students felt that in the summer, there had been sharp distinctions between students in terms of participation habits and levels of assertiveness. However, now everyone was on the same level. One student summarized this perspective by saying,

> "You have people who are on the top of the world and people who are on the bottom, and you kind of trade places as you go through; it's like an ebb and flow. It seems that with time everything settled down. All of the sudden, it's like, 'Well, that person isn't so bad' and nobody ever says anything, we just kind of dealt with things."

The pattern code of "family" was generated from the interview responses of six students who had developed a relationship orientation in the cohort. These students indicated that the quality of the relationships with other cohort members was very important to them. At this time, some students first described the cohort has a family. One student described cohort membership by saying,

> "It's almost like being part of a family. You are hoping that everybody is going to help you and you are all in it together."

Although many students described cohort membership in terms of a relationship orientation, interview responses revealed that students felt that they did not know each other on a personal basis. Student interactions were almost wholly centered around classroom requirements.

Students who placed more emphasis on the quality of cohort relationships also tended to describe the responsibility they felt toward other cohort members in a similar fashion. Most students in this group indicated that they felt at least some responsibility to care for and support other cohort members emotionally. Some students demonstrated this type of responsibility by taking notes for a student who was ill and sending cards when a student's relative died. These students referred to this type of responsibility as "a sense of caring," "we're all in this together, and we want everyone to make it through," "never wanting to see anyone upset or frustrated," "being open and having a bond."

The pattern code of "team" was generated from the responses of seven students who had developed a task orientation in the cohort. This group of students emphasized how cohort membership facilitated or constrained the accomplishment of class-related tasks. In general, these students were more focused on the task of learning and more aware of how being in a cohort affected learning processes and outcomes.

Students with a task orientation tended to describe their responsibility toward other cohort members in terms of specific tasks to be accomplished. For example, these students were more likely to say that they felt responsible toward the members of their small groups to provide

feedback and regularly participate in both face-to-face and electronic discussions. Their sense of responsibility toward their classmates did not appear to go beyond what might be found in a traditional classroom. An illustration of this can be found in one student's comment,

> "If I see somebody beginning to have a personal reaction [crisis] and on the verge of something, I say, 'Is that person on edge?' What is the extent of that for me? Probably not a phone call, but maybe an e-mail because I feel like my world fills up every corner. There's just not any space or wriggle room in my job, and I think my job fills my world."

In regard to the meaning of learning in a cohort, students were asked to respond to interview questions about how participation in small groups affected their experience in the cohort, how participation in small groups facilitated and constrained their learning, and how they felt being in a cohort facilitated and constrained their learning. Pattern codes emerged from responses to these questions and cohort activity observations. Pattern codes associated with the meaning of cohort learning at this time in the cohort centered on shared learning, student-instructor interaction and peer interaction.

Shared experiences were critical in the formation of relationships among cohort members and solidified the meaning of cohort membership. They also appeared to lead to the heart of learning in a cohort, as shared experiences resulted in a shared understanding. Cohort members had taken the same classes with the same instructors and had therefore been exposed to the same body of knowledge. Cohort members also developed a common knowledge base about each other as part of this shared understanding. As one student commented,

> "Maybe because we have had experiences over time people, we are able to go back and say things like, 'Oh, that reminds me of that first case we did' or 'Well, when I was writing my first critical journal response, that's what it was like.' Everyone has had that experience of people connecting back to things you've done. Here people are making connections because we've all been there and we've all been together; it's like this common story line."

Just as peer relationships were important to the meaning of cohort membership, peer interactions were important to the meaning of learning in a cohort. Three pattern codes were associated with peer interaction, comfort zone, small group participation, and student roles.

The comfort zone represented a developing mindset in which students felt known and accepted. In the comfort zone many students seemed willing to 'open up' to other students. Observational notes suggested that the development of the comfort zone was attributable partly to students simply interacting together over time; students became more comfortable as they became more familiar with each other. As one student said,

> It's not going to be myself and several other strangers, you'll always know who is going to be with you throughout the experience.

Students' learning experiences were shaped by their participation in many small groups, and in these small groups students had the opportunity to learn not only with but also about each other. In general, responses to interview questions indicated that students saw the groups in terms of the intellectual and emotional support that they could provide. Students associated peer feedback, a feeling of comfort, and exposure to different perspectives with group participation. All students associated at least one benefit with their group participation, and most identified two or more benefits. Not all students were completely or even mostly satisfied with their group experience. Many students noted the need to work with different personality types, the sense that they were intellectually mismatched with other students in their groups, and the sense that while group participation did hinder learning, it did not help it either. In these cases, group participation appeared to be little more than an obligation to be fulfilled. As one student commented,

> I just don't always feel like there is a lot of depth of interaction there, but we are getting done what we need to get done."

As the comfort zone in the cohort classes continued to develop throughout the fall, some students began to exhibit predictable patterns of interactions, and to a certain extent, other students began to expect and to rely on this predictability. This pattern of interactions could be described as a "role." Biddle (1979) defines a role as a set of behavior that is characteristic of persons in a particular social context. In the cohort, discernable roles had emerged by the end of the fall. In many cases, the orientation of the role matched the orientation of the student's meaning for cohort membership, that is, task roles generally appeared among task-oriented individuals, while socio-emotional roles generally appeared among relationship-oriented individuals.

Three roles that became prominent in the cohort at this time were "nurturer " "task master" and "tension breaker." The nurturer was the emotional caretaker of the cohort, the task master clarified and organized tasks at hand, and the tension breaker provided levity for the cohort, especially when the cohort seemed tense or when the class period began to drag. Students relied on these roles to organize the daily environment in the cohort. As one student said,

> "Every once in a while when I get confused, I hope (the task master) will say something."

Two pattern codes emerged from student-instructor interaction in the cohort at this time, student stress and negotiation. Regarding student stress, although the tight class schedule benefited students because it allowed them to complete coursework in a restricted amount of time, it did increase the level of stress experienced by most students. Of special note is that at the time this study was conducted, many cohort students were full-time elementary or middle

school teachers who were in their second year of teaching under a state-mandated standardized testing program. This testing program represented a state-led educational reform movement requiring annual testing of third, fifth, and eighth grade students. The results of these tests had evaluative implications for not only students but also for teachers and administrators.

Five students reported that the testing program added additional stress at work—to the point where several of these students noted that they enjoyed teaching far less than before the implementation of the testing program requirements. These students noted that they were affected largely because the stress levels in their schools were very high. Although it is impossible to know how much of this stress "spilled over" into the cohort classroom and exactly how much time some students spent on testing program-related activities to the detriment of cohort-related activities, it is notable that the testing program requirements were a constant source of discussion among most students throughout this study.

Regarding negotiation, as noted above, students experienced a fairly high level of stress during the fall. This stress was partly due to the tight class scheduling and partly due to outside forces in students' personal and professional lives. Perhaps as a result, students seemed more on edge; over time they became more collectively proactive in providing input and feedback about program activities. In return, instructors listened and responded to student input. This process was termed "negotiation" and defined as students' collective ability to influence the pace of the delivery and, to some extent, the content of instruction.

An example of negotiation occurred in which students were dissatisfied with scheduling and class content problems. One student addressed the cohort about these problems by saying,

> "I think it is time to talk as a cohort. I wanted to see if you are frustrated with the deadlines in [an instructor's] class. Right now we have report cards, assessments, and I

> know that other cohort students have to meet their parents after school. I think it's the first time that this cohort has existed and we're seeing things the instructors haven't seen from the inside of the courses."

Students collectively wrote a letter to the instructor, first selecting a spokesperson and then drafting the contents of the letter. The instructor responded by negotiating with the cohort to find a mutually agreeable resolution.

The pattern codes described above formed a model representing students' cohort and learning experience during the fourth through sixth month of the cohort. This model is presented in Figure 2.

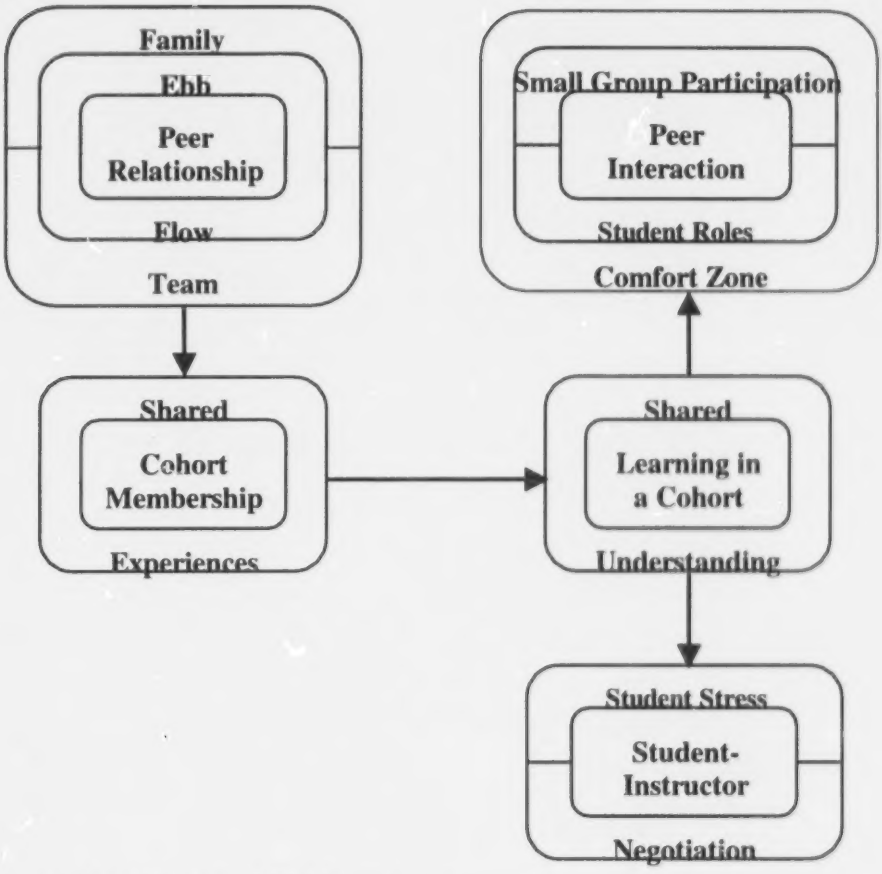

Figure 2. Model of Students' Fall Experiences

Spring: The Performance Stage

Students recessed for a two-week holiday and then returned to the classroom in the first week of January. They began a new class that continued until the first week in April and continued a class they began in the summer. Both classes concluded in the middle of April, marking the end of data collection. In interviews conducted at this time, students were asked to describe the most frustrating and valuable part of cohort membership, their relationships with other students in the cohort, and how they would describe cohort membership to a fictional friend. Their responses, together with observational data collected from January to April, formed

the basis for the following emergent pattern codes associated with peer relationships, shared experiences, close but not deep, and freedom to speak.

Regarding shared experiences, students valued cohort membership for the sense of continuity it provided to their relationships and in their learning experience. Many student responses to questions about cohort membership included descriptions of how the continuity of the cohort had facilitated their learning. Because the students shared experiences over time, they built upon previously established relationships and course material throughout their experience. The importance of shared experience was demonstrated by the numerous of times students described their shared history to a new instructor. As an example, one student wondered how new instructors would "ever understand what we've been through."

The pattern code "close but not deep" refers to the nature of students' peer relationships. Paradoxically, students said that while both emotional and academic support were a valuable part of cohort membership, many felt that their peer relationships were not very deep. Perhaps this was due to the fact that few students met outside of class except when they were required to do so to complete an assignment. Time was probably a factor; as one student commented,

> "I think it [lack of deep relationships] may be [because of] time. It would be interesting to spend more time to have more of a relationship with others, but I am lucky if I make it to class and then I am lucky if I turn in my assignment, so it may be time."

At the time that the third student interviews were conducted, students needed to finish one final class, scheduled to start and end in June, to complete the program core. The conclusion of this class represented the conclusion of the formal cohort format. Each student would then begin classes in specialization track, for example, in reading or in math. Some students already

knew that they would join former cohort students in their new classes, while other students knew that they would not. Students who expected to see their former classmates were pleased, but many students who did not expect to see their former classmates in future classes expressed doubt that they would remain in contact with them. One student commented,

> "I realized that once the cohort ends I probably won't be in touch. I know that there may be good intentions but I know the reality of it is that it usually doesn't happen."

The pattern code of "freedom to speak" refers to the fact that while peer relationships were not deep, many students valued them in part because these relations provided a sense of security that allowed them to find their voice. After reviewing students' responses, it was notable that many students indicated that they typically were afraid to speak in classroom environments. The cohort format helped these students find their voice. Students who said they were shy were more likely to describe cohort membership as providing comfort and intimacy. As one student commented,

> "[The cohort] becomes an intimate group where you dare to risk a little bit more."

Regarding the meaning of learning in a cohort at this time, students were asked how the cohort had facilitated or constrained their learning, what it was like to be a student in the cohort, and how they would describe their relationship with faculty members. Their responses were combined with observational data for this time period and resulted in emergent pattern codes that mainly clustered around two themes, peer interaction and student-instructor interaction. The one exception was shared understandings, which was directly related to learning in a cohort.

Shared understandings once again appeared to be a critical part of learning in a cohort. Cohort members continued to build upon the same body of knowledge and continued to develop a common knowledge base about each other as part of this shared understanding. Because students shared the same knowledge base, they could refer back to previous material and make links across different classes. Several students were observed discussing previous class material and activities as they reviewed their peers' assignments. The importance of shared knowledge also emerged when students were asked if they wished that new students could join their closed cohort. Many students said they did not know how new students could ever come to understand their common knowledge base; they would simply be "too far behind."

Pattern codes clustered around peer interaction included the comfort zone, small group participation, student roles, peer responsibility, peer discourse, different peer perspectives, and peer feedback. The comfort zone that was established in the fall was maintained in the spring. As before, this zone represented a mindset in which students felt known and accepted. As before, the comfort zone was partly attributable to students simply interacting together over time. As one student commented,

> "There is a comfort zone. You are with these people for an extended period of time and not just one class. It's a good idea because you are able to discuss things with people that are your colleagues and not strangers because of the amount of time you spend with them."

Students' learning experiences continued to be shaped by their participation in small groups. Because of this extensive group participation, even students' understanding of cohort membership included the concept of working together in groups. As one student commented,

> "[Regarding cohort membership], I hope students are used to working in groups because if they're not they need to grow a little bit in that area."

In general, by the time the third interviews were conducted, most students appeared ready for their groups to disband and they were ready to work with different students. Long-term participation in these groups did maintain the comfort zone for many students. For some students, however, long-term participation also involved a sense of stagnation.

Student roles that emerged in the summer and fall were maintained in the spring. The previously mentioned student roles of nurturer, taskmaster, and tension breaker continued to be salient in the cohort. However, other more subtle roles emerged as students became more comfortable with each other. Specifically, some students became known for certain expertise areas or for certain analytic and reflective learning styles.

Peer responsibility, in terms of being responsible to provide academic support, became an emergent theme in the spring. Peer responsibility could mean providing academic support to students in one's own small group or even outside the group. As an example, one student said,

> "[I have a sense of responsibility] if someone needs some information, like I have an envelope today and I made [a student] a copy of an article that I thought would work for her. I made a commitment to send it to her, and I am sending it to her. [Another student] wrote me that she was frustrated with something and I wrote back that I would be happy to share my paper with her. I outlined some things that I had done that I thought she might want to try. Even if [students] are not in your small group, there is a lot of exchange that goes on."

On several occasions, it was observed that student discussion in the cohort was more extensive, more likely to be initiated by students instead of the instructor, and more in-depth than student discussion in traditional classrooms. Many students compared their cohort experience to previous undergraduate experience and said that they were much more involved in the class

discussions than they used to be. As the spring classes progressed, students were more likely to initiate and maintain class discussions. On at least three occasions in one class students initiated a class-related discussion and maintained it for over ten minutes with little or no input from the instructor. On all of these occasions, students' discussion stayed on topic and moved from student to student until most students had contributed at least once. Students also felt that their discussions in the cohort were unique because, since students were familiar with each other, their conversations could reach a deeper level of analysis or reflection. One student, who was enrolled in other non-cohort courses at the same time she was participating in the cohort, compared her classroom experiences by saying,

> "I do think that the level of discussion in these classes has been notable different than the ones in some of my other classes. Just by virtue of being in the cohort together all that time the discussion is at a different level."

Students often mentioned the value of hearing other students' perspectives on class material and by the spring, students appeared comfortable enough with each other to share perspectives and opinions. Students thought both hearing and sharing different perspectives improved their critical thinking skills. As one student said,

> "You see other's perspectives on things. It makes you more conscious of your own way of learning and thinking and somebody else's and then you have to negotiate that."

Students became very proficient in giving and receiving peer feedback, perhaps because they knew each other so well. Because students were open to giving and receiving peer feedback,

they each became a resource for the others. One part of providing peer feedback was what one student termed "active listening." This student described active listening as,

> "...really paying attention to what [other students] are doing by trying to see where they are headed. You can't go through [the cohort] without being an active listener, otherwise you are just piling comment on top of comment. I think there is a strong awareness that when someone says something, listen to what they have to say."

Pattern codes clustered around student-instructor interaction included instructor to instructor communication, feedback to instructors, latitude, and cohort agency. Instructor to instructor communication referred to the fact that many students believed that instructors communicated extensively about the cohort. As one student said,

> "I think it's to our benefit if they interface because their discussions about the syllabus and the assignments impacts the direction we are going in. I don't see them as individual teachers, I see them as a team."

By the time the third student interviews were constructed, several instructors had asked students for feedback on specific classes and on the cohort as a whole. In part this was due to the fact that the program was in its first operational year, and this cohort was the "pioneer cohort." By the spring, instructors were getting ready for a new cohort and they were asking students for their ideas on how to make the program, classes and cohort format a more effective learning environment. Students knew that they were "guinea pigs" and that instructors were interested in their opinions. As one student said,

> "I know that we are the guinea pigs and that they are learning a lot through us as well as we are learning through them but I think that they have really valued our feedback."

In the fall students negotiated with instructors to change course requirements. In the spring, the effect of this negotiation for students appeared to be a sense of latitude in their interactions with instructors. Many students believed that because they were in a cohort, they enjoyed a greater sense of latitude than they otherwise would have in a traditional classroom. For example, one student said,

> "I think because it's a cohort situation and it's a small group we are able to have a little bit more latitude as far as making the class decisions as to what is going on. And that takes flexibility on the teachers' part. If it was a Psychology 101 class something like that just wouldn't happen."

In the fall, when students negotiated with instructors they realized they had the ability to work in unison as a cohort to achieve a common goal. This ability was conceptualized as cohort agency, and referred to the fact that the cohort had developed the means through which to address problems and create solutions as a group. In the spring, students did not experience another incident similar to the negotiation incident. However, students maintained their sense of cohort agency as demonstrated by several comments students made comments alluding to cohort agency. For example, one student said,

> "I think there is a different regard [from instructors] knowing that we're part of that group."

The pattern codes described above formed a model representing students' cohort and learning experience during the seventh through tenth month of the cohort. This model is presented in Figure 3.

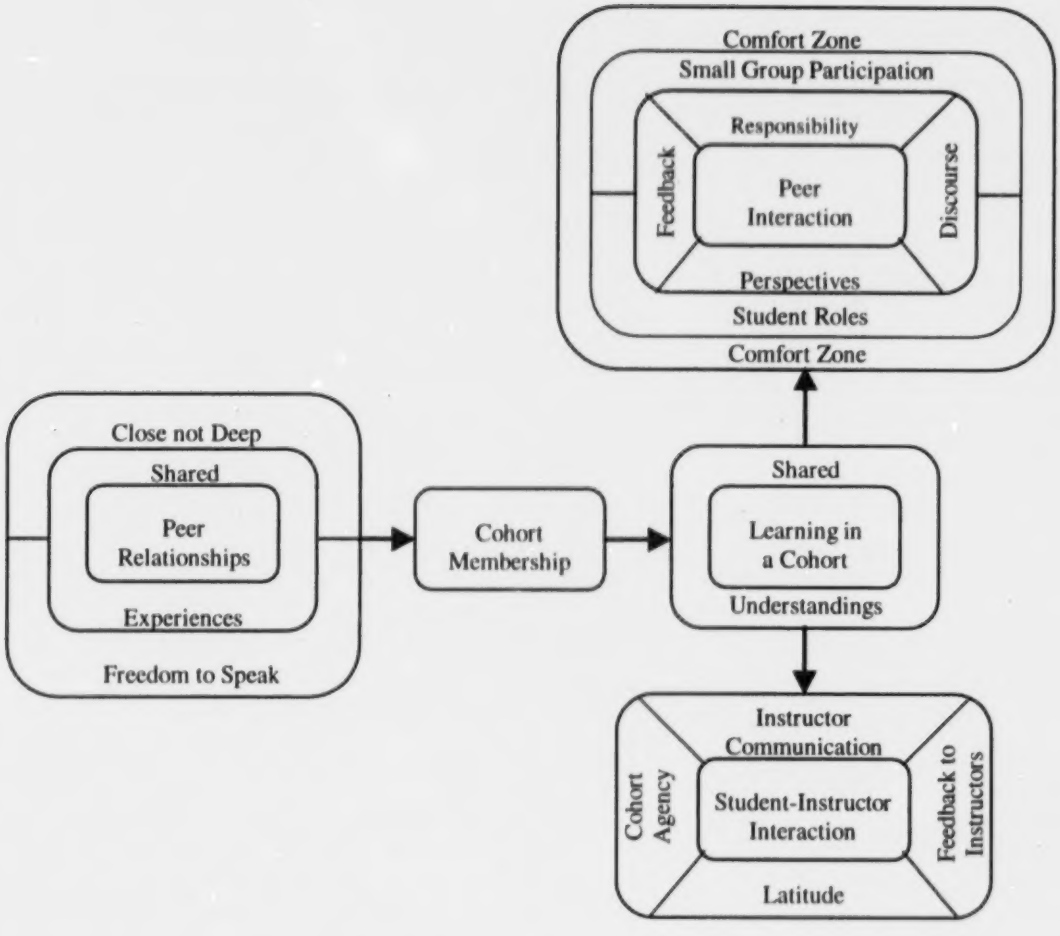

Figure 3. Model of Students' Spring Experiences

Discussion

What does cohort membership mean to students as they move through their educational program? At the start of this new cohort, cohort membership appeared to have little significance. Many students were unfamiliar with cohort formats when they applied to the program. Some of these students could be called "accidental tourists" because they "fell into" the program somewhat by chance. Other students could be called "pioneers" because they were intrigued by

the opportunity to belong to a program existing for the first time. Five months into the program, cohort membership gained significance through students' shared experiences and shared history, and through the development of either a relationship- or a task-orientation towards peers. The ebb and flow of peer relationship was also an important part of cohort membership. Ten months into the program, cohort membership in this cohort was drawing to a close. Students reflected that while shared experiences were important to cohort membership, peer relationships could be characterized as close but not deep. Despite this, students felt that these relationships allowed each of them to have an active voice in the cohort.

What does learning in a cohort mean to students as they move through their educational program? At the start of this new cohort, learning in a cohort was associated with student stress and instructors revising in action. In addition, learning occurred in the context of small group participation, and as such, both conflict and cohesion were part of students' learning experiences. Five months into the program, learning in a cohort was associated with shared understandings. Continual small group participation and the development of student roles led to the predictability underlying the cohort comfort zone. However, student stress and negotiation between students and faculty also played a major role in students' learning experiences. Ten months into the program, learning in a cohort was associated with the continued maintenance of the comfort zone, small group participation and student roles. These factors increased the importance of peer interaction, which was characterized by peer responsibility, feedback discourse and different perspectives. Students had learned how to learn from each other.

Does a cohort bear resemblance to a community, and if so, how? Findings from this study suggest this cohort did bear strong resemblance to a community. Cohort members developed meaningful relationships and habitual patterns of interaction - roles - that formed the

foundation for a comfort zone within which members developed learned to trust each other. However, like other community members, cohort members experienced periods of conflict and cohesion that mirrored the developmental path of the cohort as a whole. Cohort members had to learn to "live together" through both easy and difficult times. Despite the difficulties sometimes associated with cohort living, the cohort did facilitate the members' main task - learning. Cohort members learned how to learn from each other.

Limitations

It is important to note several limitations inherent in this study. First, this work is exploratory and uses a limited sample; results cannot be assumed to be generalizable to student cohorts overall. Many aspects about the cohort program under study were unique. For example, this cohort program was in its first year of operation; student experiences in established cohort programs may be different. Also, the cohort program under study relied heavily on the use of small group participation; student experiences in cohorts that do not incorporate extensive use of small groups may be different. Finally, many students in this cohort were under extreme pressure at their jobs due to state mandated student testing. Because of this, stress levels may have been higher among these students than among students of other cohorts.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although this study provided an in-depth look at cohort life, several questions about cohorts remain. First, a "pioneer" cohort was studied. How might "pioneer" status affect students' cohort experiences? A broad question might explore all the ways in which "pioneer" cohorts differ from "non-pioneer" cohorts. Second, cohort students stayed together for almost a year, and near the end of the year, some students suggested that one year of cohort membership was enough. However, many higher education programs use cohort formats that extend over two

or even three years. What benefits and drawbacks are associated with extended cohort memberships? Is there an "ideal" length of time for cohort membership? Third, in some cases, student-instructor relationships differed from the student-instructor relationships found in traditional classrooms. Although some literature does address student-instructor relationships in cohorts (e.g., Teitel, 1997; Yerkes, 1995), additional studies need to be conducted to identify how to best harness the power of cohort agency and best direct cohort students' desire to contribute to decision-making processes. Finally, what happens after a cohort is over? Some students expected to see each other again in future classes, while some students knew that they would be "on their own" in future classes. Is there a negative "cohort effect," such that students who move to other educational contexts and leave their cohort peers behind suffer an emotional let down? Is it difficult for students to readjust to non-cohort classrooms? Additional research in this area needs to be conducted to better understand the "professional living arrangements" called educational cohorts.

References

Barnett, B. G., & Caffarella, R. S. (1992). The use of cohorts: A powerful way for addressing issues of diversity in preparation programs. Paper presented at the meeting of the University Council for Education Administration, Minneapolis, MN.

Barnett, B. G., & Muse, I.D. (1993). Cohort groups in educational administration: Promises and challenges. Journal of School Leadership, 3, 400–415.

Biddle, B. J. (1979). Role theory: Expectations, identities, and behavior. New York: Academic Press.

Centra, J., & Rock, D. (1971). College environments and student academic achievement. American Educational Research Journal, 8, 623-634.

Darkenwalk, G. C. (1987). Assessing the social environment of adult classes. Studies in the Education of Adults, 19, 127–136.

Ennis, C. D. (1989). Educational climate in elective adult education: Student decision making and communication patterns. Adult Education Quarterly, 39, 76–88.

Festinger, L. (1950). Informal social communication. Psychological Review, 57, 271-282.

Forsyth, D. R. (1990). Group dynamics. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Janis, I. L. (1972). Victims of groupthink. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Knowles, M. S. (1984). Andragony in action: Applying the principles of adult learning. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Knowles, M. S. (1990). The adult learner: A neglected species. Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Co.

Lewin, K. (1951). Field theory in social science. New York: Harper.

Maher, M. A. (2000, June). A Feeling of Belonging: An Exploratory Analysis of Cohort Membership. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Society, Miami, FL.

Marshall, E. M. (1995). Transforming the way we work: The power of the collaborative workplace. NY: American Management Association.

Merriam, S., & Brockett, R. (1997). The profession and practice of adult education: An introduction. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Pasacarella, E. T. (1985). College environmental influences on learning and cognitive development: A critical review and a synthesis. In J.C. Smart (Ed.), Higher education handbook of theory and research, Vol. 1 (pp. 1-61). New York: Agatha Press.

Reynolds, K. C. (November, 1993). Students in cohort programs and intensive schedule classes: Does familiarity breed differences? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Pittsburgh, PA.

Ridgeway, C. L. (1983). The dynamics of small group behavior. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sprague, D., & Norton, P. (1999). Studying technology as a cohort: Teachers' reflections on the process. Proceedings, Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education, SITE 99, San Antonio, Texas.

Teitel, L. (1997). Understanding and harnessing the power of the cohort model in preparing educational leaders. Peabody Journal of Education, 72, 66-85.

Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities. The Journal of Higher Education, 68, 599–623.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequences in small groups. Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399.

Wesson, L. H., Holman, S. O., Holman, D., & Cox, D. (1996). Cohesion or collusion: Impact of a cohort structure on educational leadership doctoral students. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Williams, K. B., Harkins, S., & Latane, B. (1981). Identifiability as a deterrent to social loafing: Two cheering experiments. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 40, 303–311.

Yerkes, D. M., Basom, M. R., Norris, C., & Barnett B. (1995). Using cohorts in the development of educational leaders. Paper presented at the 13th Annual International Conference of the Association of Management, Vancouver, Canada.